

Agitator, Facilitator or Benefactor? Assessing South Africa's Zimbabwe Policy

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During his visit to South Africa in July 2003, President George W Bush declared South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki to be the "point man" on Zimbabwe. He stated then: "I have no intention of second-guessing [Mbeki's] tactics. We want the same outcome. Mbeki is the point man in this important subject, he is working very hard and is in touch with the parties involved, and the US supports him in his efforts."²

How is the *point man* doing, and are fresh tactics now called for by non-African players in the light of the 31 March 2005 parliamentary election in Zimbabwe?

This testimony to the House Committee on International Relations will focus on three issues:

- What has been the record of South African policy towards Zimbabwe? Why has South Africa pursued this particular line of action – and is it consistent with South African regional foreign policy overall? Is South Africa's record on Zimbabwe consistent with the stated human-rights orientation of South African foreign policy?
- What has been the impact of this policy within Zimbabwe?
- What policy options are there in the circumstances for other external actors?

South African Foreign Policy: An Appraisal

South African regional foreign policy is officially³ based on the realisation "that the future of South Africa is inextricably linked to the future of the African continent and that of our neighbors in Southern Africa." The Republic's engagement with Africa thus "rests on three pillars: Strengthening Africa's institutions continentally and regionally *vis-à-vis* the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC); Supporting the implementation of Africa's socio-economic development programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); and, Strengthening bilateral political and socio-economic relations by way of effective structures for dialogue and co-operation."

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² At http://www.southafrica.info/doing_business/sa_trade/agreements/bush-savisit.htm.

³ SA Department of Foreign Affairs' Strategic Plan 2005-2008, at <http://www.dfa.gov.za/departments/stratplan05-08.pdf>.

Or in the words of the Foreign Minister Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at the 2005 Foreign Affairs Budget vote in Parliament,⁴

In order to meet the development needs of Africa, African leaders have pledged that Africans should possess their own future and development agenda. Nowhere more than in Africa has the need for the mobilization of resources to address the developmental challenges facing the people been so stark. ... it is our assertion that without the necessary resources to address developmental challenges, the issue of conflict resolution, peace and stability will remain elusive.... We make bold the statement that Africans themselves must take destiny into their own hands. In this regard, Africans must themselves be at the forefront of mobilization of their own resources to address the developmental challenges facing the continent. In this context, NEPAD will only succeed to the extent to which Africans themselves are prepared to take possession of their own economic recovery and renewal.

This has incorporated a more proactive role, through the African Union, in settling African conflicts, including notably in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan and, more recently, Côte d'Ivoire.

In each of the aforementioned cases, the South African government has devoted considerable resources on a sustained basis, including, in Burundi, Congo and Sudan, peacekeeping troops. The Congo settlement came about as a result of the South African-sponsored Sun City talks. Over Burundi, Pretoria has dedicated former President Nelson Mandela and current Deputy President Jacob Zuma to the task of securing a peace agreement and, latterly, facilitating a transitional government and new constitution. South Africa chairs the AU committee on the reconstruction of Sudan. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Mbeki has acted as a mediator on behalf of the AU to "expedite the peace process".⁵ More indirectly, South Africa played a supporting role in the regional rejection of Togo's attempted unconstitutional transition after President Eyadema's death.

In these and other respects, South Africa's Africa policy amounts, wittingly or not, to attempting to export its own transitional conflict-resolution model. Indeed, South Africa's championing of the objectives and principles of the African Union incorporate a commitment to "promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance."⁶ This raises in turn general questions about the efficacy of external mediation in an environment especially where there is an absence of the sort of political culture and a willingness to accept fundamental, deep-seated compromise of the sort that made the South African transition possible.

The South African government's policy has steadfastly been to avoid confrontation with Harare over this matter, instead preferring to attempt to facilitate contact between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In so doing, Pretoria's caution has contrasted with the profile of President Mbeki's expansionist African vision and commitments. When not quiet, Pretoria's diplomacy has generally included expressions of support for ZANU and criticism of the MDC with occasional mild rebuke of aspects of Mugabe's policies.⁷

⁴ At <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2005/dzum0415.htm>

⁵ At <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2005/paha0415.htm>.

⁶ The constitutive act of the African Union at <http://www.africa-union.org/home/Welcome.htm>.

⁷ Laurie Nathan, 'Consistency and inconsistencies in South African foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 81, 2, 2005, p.367.

Whatever the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions between lofty principles and policy practice, according to one senior SA Department of Foreign Affairs official, "We believe that from our South African background that negotiations are the way to go. To get the Zimbabweans to do this, we believe that we have to engage Zimbabwe, to talk to them and to gain their confidence. Sanctions won't remove the Zimbabwe government, and will not bring about a solution but rather havoc. Thus we looked at other options [to quiet diplomacy], but dismissed them."⁸

Indeed, at the time of President Bush's African trip in July 2003, Mbeki said that the principal responsibility for the resolution of those challenges lay with the Zimbabweans themselves, noting "It is very important that they should move forward with urgency to find resolutions to these questions."⁹ Since the Zimbabwean presidential election in March 2002, this has involved a series of meetings with MDC and ZANU-PF representatives. Pretoria hopes that these will be resumed *en force* following the March 2005 election.

Until now such talks have apparently had little discernable impact on the willingness of Mugabe to reign in his rhetoric or latterly to act according to the spirit and letter of the August 2004 SADC protocol on 'Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections'. In contrast, the impact of continued political impasse on Zimbabwe has been marked. There has been an overall worsening of the political and economic environment inside Zimbabwe over the past five years.

Politically, any concessions that President Mugabe has made in the direction of free and fair elections were, in the MDC's and much of civil society's view, overshadowed by the tightening of laws governing the electoral process, the role of civil society and the media. While the election appeared free-and-fair, the run-up to the event was in the opposition's view wholly skewed in the incumbent's favor and, given Harare's refusal to admit foreign journalist and monitors, obscured from external scrutiny

The attempts at facilitation have also not relieved the economic crisis, even though South Africa has, since 2000, supplied its northern neighbor with credits for food, fuel and electricity all of which have been in short supply in Zimbabwe. For Mugabe's political crisis has created an economic one in which his country's precipitous and ongoing economic decline has affected mainly the poor. Inflation remains very high, at around 125%, though down from the peak of around 620%. Exports in 2004 were US\$1.7 billion, around one-third of what they were in 1997. GDP is little over half the 1997 figure of US\$6.5 billion, mainly as a result of the government's fast track land reform programme. The formal sector job market has shrunk over this period from about 1.4 million jobs to around 800,000 today. Horticulture and tobacco exports are now around half and 35% of their peak output respectively. Even more seriously, wheat, maize, milk, and soya production are all dramatically reduced, with the result that Zimbabwe has to rely on imports for these staple foodstuffs, pushing the price up to unaffordable levels for many in a population where 30%+ of adults are HIV+. Importantly, the whole economic system is fraught with structural imbalances, with a

⁸ Telephonic discussion with Kingsley Mamabolo, Deputy Director-General (Africa), SA Department of Foreign Affairs, 16 April 2005.

⁹ At http://www.southafrica.info/doing_business/sa_trade/agreements/bush-savisit.htm.

negative interest rate discouraging saving (which explains, too, why the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange is one of the best performing in Africa), with industry kept 'drip-fed' on scarce foreign exchange. The rising (and unserviced) domestic (US\$1.1 billion) and foreign (around US\$3 billion) debt stock has demonstrated the need for the government to go continuously into the market to borrow and print notes to prevent collapse.

In spite of this crisis, the regime in Harare persists partly because it has been able to continue to distribute largesse to key political constituents, partly due to the grip maintained on the opposition and civil society by the security services including the youth brigades, partly due to the powerlessness of MDC tactics and leadership, and partly due to political support for Harare from sectors inside and outside of Zimbabwe who are prepared to overlook ZANU-PF's misrule precisely because they approve of Mugabe taking on Western powers apparently fearlessly.

Although Pretoria has frequently asserted that it is working productively with both parties, MDC frustration over the South African position has boiled over on several occasions most notably following the Bush visit when MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai accused President Mbeki of making "false and mischievous" statements on political talks. Tsvangirai said that no talks were taking place and that Mbeki's statement to President Bush that a dialogue had begun was "without foundation whatsoever". Tsvangirai said: "Statements claiming there is dialogue going on are patently false and mischievous. Such statements are manifestly partisan." He said claims about talks between Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's party and the opposition were aimed at "buying time" for Mugabe.¹⁰

Whereas Tsvangirai has subsequently publicly supported Pretoria's mediation role,¹¹ others in his party have been less diplomatic in their observations. For example, MDC spokesman Eddie Cross has argued:¹²

It is now very apparent to anyone with half a brain that all is not well in South Africa when it comes to handling the Zimbabwe crisis. Here we have a situation where by every measure, the ZANU-PF led government has failed – the economy is in tatters, half our population needs food aid, the quality of life for the majority has deteriorated to the point where nearly half the adult population has decamped. Almost all basic human and political rights are being abused and worse on a daily basis. And the regime has lost its legitimacy because of a well-known and clearly exposed record of electoral fraud and abuse. Yet, the leadership in South Africa and many of its apologists insist on maintaining the position that things are "improving" and that a "free and fair election" is still possible. It's not out of ignorance. It's not because they simply want to be perverse. What then is the reason – the real reason for this ridiculous stance?

Cross has argued that Pretoria's policy towards Zimbabwe is based on a fear of encouraging a split in the South Africa's ruling tripartite alliance made up of the African National Congress (ANC)-SA Communist Party (SACP)-Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) especially given the origins of the MDC in the Zimbabwean trade union movement.

¹⁰ At http://www.news24.com/News24/Archive/0,6119,2-1659_1385106,00.html.

¹¹ See, for example, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200305050378.html>.

¹² See his email circular labeled 'The Mystery of South Africa's Position' dated 19 March 2005.

The South African government maintains that its policies have been relatively successful in the circumstances when viewed objectively against Zimbabwe's needs and, in Pretoria's view, in the absence of alternatives. For example, most recently, President Mbeki said in the South African parliament on 14 April 2005 that although the jury was still out on whether Zimbabwe's parliamentary poll was free and fair, South Africa's policy towards its neighbor would remain unchanged. "We have", he said, "insisted for some time that the solution lies in the hands of Zimbabweans and we will persist with that position."¹³

Other prominent South African government ministers have echoed this position. Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad has said¹⁴ that the "only option for South Africa is to create the conditions for both sides to move forward together, to allow Zimbabweans to help themselves". South African policy, he said, had been focused on "getting the sides together to agree on the constitution and to co-operate on dealing with the economic crisis". He observed that "We would not do it differently [if we had to do it over again]. What have other powers done that is different [to SA]? How did they [the United States and Europe] want us to get tougher, we are not for *regime change* in Zimbabwe? Africa would not allow this. We are battling against forces that have taken decisions about having regime change in Zimbabwe. And we are not for the so-called Milosevic option either". South African policy, he contended, "had successfully prevented civil war in Zimbabwe."

South African policy choice of 'constructive engagement' – described somewhat pejoratively as 'quiet diplomacy' – reflects thus a combination of its own political traditions and stress on compromise and negotiation, the history of race and colonialism in the region and the resonance of these factors including around land distribution domestically, and a belief that the alternatives including criticism of Mugabe will only marginalize the role to be played by external powers. This may explain why President Mbeki has endorsed the efforts of the Zimbabwean government in dealing with the colonial inheritance of inequitable racial land redistribution, while at the same time arguing that his critics are wrong if they believe that Zimbabwe's leaders will simply obey what he tells them.¹⁵

Pretoria is today centered on one major short-term goal: To acquire the support of both parties (rather than Mugabe employing his now two-thirds majority) to change the "flawed" constitution and "get rid of certain legislation such as the POSA" (Public Order and Security Act). The tactic to achieve this consensus is through facilitating talks between the MDC and ZANU-PF. In this Pretoria would prefer to see "the United States and everybody putting pressure on and ensuring dialogue, engaging with the MDC and ZANU and not playing to the gallery."¹⁶

¹³ 'Mbeki says Zimbabwe policy stays', *Business Day*, 15 April 2005.

¹⁴ Telephonic discussion, 15 April 2005.

¹⁵ See Thabo Mbeki, 'The people of Zimbabwe must decide their own future', Letter from the President, *ANC Today*, 3, 18, 9-15 May 2003.

¹⁶ Mamabolo, *op cit*.

Future Zimbabwean Scenarios and Policy Options

ZANU-PF now, post-March 2005 election, appears to hold most of the cards. It would, in the opinion of a number of experts, probably have won the election without its pre-election shenanigans and gerrymandering, although probably without the two-thirds majority it now holds. This margin is crucial to allow ZANU-PF to alter the constitution, a long-time Mugabe goal around which the opposition galvanised itself for the February 2000 referendum.

Following his two-thirds election majority, Mugabe now holds all the political cards. Yet his aim appears to be to create a façade of stability and consensus within parliament and with the MDC, while increasing his discretionary powers and cementing his rule through constitutional means. He would hope, in so doing, for greater international acceptance and possible economic recovery through donor support including the IMF and through Harare's burgeoning Chinese interests.

Thus to a limited extent only the future depends on whether the MDC is prepared to play along.

The opposition has two options at this stage. First, to play the 'obstructionist parliamentarian', not unlike the old South African Progressive Party, fighting for its cause from inside parliament. Even though this may find favour with those MDC members concerned about their livelihood in the parliamentary gravy-train, this type of role will likely simply serve to grant a stamp of approval to Mugabe, the election process and ZANU-PF's rule.

A second MDC option is not to enter parliament and publicly contest the election result, using party structures and its union base to mobilise mass protests – the 'Ukrainian option'. This route would certainly demonstrate the MDC's sentiment on the election process and result, and display mettle comparable to that of ZANU's. But the MDC has hitherto shown little capacity or stomach for this type of action, and it is uncertain whether Tsvangirai can make this large leap up to the plate of mass insurrection.

A number of policy alternatives arise in the light of the above assessment.

Some Policy Suggestions

These options have to be **cognizant of the unlikelihood of the South African government abandoning its current policy approach**. Pretoria will likely continue with sporadic attempts continuing to bring the parties together but probably with only rhetorical and peripheral success given Mugabe's and ZANU's obduracy.

In the circumstances, the US and other (mainly Western) partners have five options to get out of the current policy rut:

- **Continue and ratchet up the current sanctions regime**, widening the list of individuals coming under targeted sanctions. **Likely impact:** This will undoubtedly both alienate and irritate both the Zimbabwean government (which

craves international attention and acceptance) and its African partners including South Africa. It is likely to have little impact on the polity of Zimbabwe, however, given ZANU has displayed a willingness to allow the country to implode economically to ensure it stays in power. It has also openly, wherever it can, flouted sanctions – Mugabe's trip to the Pope's funeral being the latest example – raising questions about enforcement. There is little doubt that targeted sanctions hurt key figures in a regime craving international acceptance, but even if they remain in place to maintain pressure, other forms of engagement should occur in parallel.

- **Link progress and assistance for wider African initiatives** including support for NEPAD to a change in African and specifically South African policy. **Likely impact:** This will be widely rejected by Africa as akin to throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and may only serve to add credence to Mugabe's portrayal of the crisis as having colonial/neo-colonial roots. It may make it more difficult for Mbeki and others to apply pressure on ZANU-PF, both for the aforementioned reason and given the resonance that Mugabe's argument would have within their own domestic constituencies.
- **Target and increase overt support for the pro-democracy movement and individuals** within Zimbabwe. This could occur along similar lines to the support offered to the South African liberation movements during apartheid, including financial support for legal costs, institutional support of key organizations such as the National Constitutional Assembly, and fellowships and scholarships. **Likely impact:** Given that short-term change will come from within ZANU, this is at best a long-term strategy for capacity- and institution-building. It will also serve to focus Zimbabwean government attention and ire on these individuals. It also feeds into Mugabe's rhetoric about the MDC being a creation of Tony Blair. Over the longer term, such civil society-oriented assistance will, however, be the platform making democracy possible.
- **Do nothing more** – or the 'leave things as they are' alternative, maintaining the existing US/EU sanctions regime in place. **Likely impact:** As unpalatable as this may be from a (Western) domestic political and human rights perspective, in the longer-term leaving Zimbabwe to its own political and economic devices may permit the situation to ripen, reaching a 'tipping point' leading to radical political change. However, this could result in unacceptable, widespread humanitarian catastrophe in the immediate-term.
- **Strategic engagement** with key individuals and countries to urge reform in Zimbabwe. This could occur both through the African Union and other multilateral bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, and with bilateral US partners such as Botswana, Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, and Uganda. South Africa and key members of the African National Congress could be brought on board for this option and would welcome a change of approach from Washington – and it would be critical to the success of 'Strategic Engagement' to do so. Such a strategy would critically have to involve engaging with reformist elements in ZANU-PF factions along with influential individuals both inside Zimbabwe and within the diaspora. This will crucially have to involve **placing on the table an**

attractive recovery package for Zimbabwe including on land but conditional on political reform. It may also have to include engineering an exit strategy for Mugabe and his close associates, including immunity from prosecution. All this may usefully involve the **appointment of a US Special Envoy** to Zimbabwe.

Likely impact: This demands a level of sophistication and knowledge of Zimbabwe in Western policy hitherto invisible, but it **may be the best and least disruptive means of ensuring political change and economic and social stability in Zimbabwe in the short-term**. The absence of Western engagement on Zimbabwe will not only complicate the search for wider solutions to African development issues, but may also lead to an increasingly 'eastwards' (i.e. Chinese orientation) in select African foreign policies.

In contemplating the way forward for Western policy towards Zimbabwe, four issues are critical: **First**, to **abandon any use of the terminology of regime change**, suggesting **instead change within the regime**. **Second**, related to this point, in the absence of a more strategic approach being adopted by the MDC, change in Zimbabwe is most likely to come from within ZANU-PF. Thus the aim should be to **cultivate relationships within ZANU**, not necessarily just from the ranks of the incumbent politicians, in so doing identifying factions and encouraging reformists. **Third**, the West must plan on the basis that the situation in Zimbabwe cannot wait to be resolved by Mugabe's death. Nor can the international community wait until his death to lay the basis of transition. As Togo shows currently, a vacuum can result in chaos. **Fourth**, to **ask Zimbabweans what they want**.

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